Does Time Need Me, or Do I Need Time?

The Ontology of the Now, the Invariance of Presence, and the Ground of Being

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I. THE FEAR

We speak of time as though it were a force pressing against us from outside — a tide that carries us forward whether we consent or not, that erodes us slowly, that will eventually swallow us whole. We say we are running out of time, that time is passing, that we are losing time as though something is being taken from us by an entity with its own agenda and its own momentum.

But what if that fear is built on a misreading? What if time is not the powerful one in this relationship? What if the question itself — does time need me, or do I need time? — has a third answer that neither physics nor common intuition has fully named?

> *Time has never moved. Only events are actualized — within the one Now that was here before us and will hold the last moment of our existence exactly as it holds this one.*

II. WHAT TIME IS NOT

Before we can answer the question, we must be precise about what we mean by time. This essay is not concerned with measured time — the seconds, minutes, and hours that human beings invented to coordinate their lives. Clocks measure motion. The rotation of the earth, the oscillation of an atom, the swing of a pendulum — these are physical events we use as reference points. They are useful. They are not time itself.

What we are asking about is ontological time: the condition that makes change possible at all. Not the clock on the wall, but whatever it is that allows one state of reality to become a different state. Not duration, but the structure of becoming.

When Ecclesiastes says there is a time for everything — a time to be born and a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh — it is not describing a ticking dimension. It is describing order, season, fittingness. The right unfolding of events within reality. That is precisely what ontological time is: the condition that makes ordered change possible. Clocks measure it. They do not constitute it.

III. THE DEPENDENT CONDITION

Ontological time has a peculiar property that we rarely confront directly: it cannot exist alone.

Time is not something that exists and then produces change; it is what we call the ordered structure of change itself.

Aristotle observed that time is the number of motion with respect to before and after. Einstein showed that time is inseparable from space and matter. Both are pointing at the same truth, though neither pressed it to its full conclusion. Time is not merely dependent on matter and space — it is entirely dependent on change. Remove change and time does not slow down or become thin. It simply ceases. There is nothing for it to be.

This means time is not a substance. It is not a thing that exists in its own right, that would persist if the universe were emptied of everything else. It is the formal condition of transformation — what we call the structure of before and after, which only arises when something is actually undergoing change within space.

> *No change, no time. No matter, nothing to change. No space, nowhere to express change. Time is not a force. It is what becomes intelligible when change occurs.*

So already the fear begins to dissolve. We are afraid of time as though it were a river carrying us to a waterfall. But a river requires water, gravity, and a channel. Time requires matter, change, and space. Neither the river nor time is primary. Both are relational emergences — real, but not self-sustaining.

IV. THE NOW

Within this structure, there is one point unlike all others. Not the past — that is fixed, no longer becoming, accessible only through the reconstruction we call memory. Not the future — that is not yet actual, existing only as projection and anticipation. There is one point at which reality is actively being decided. Where potential collapses into actual. Where what could be becomes what is.

That point is the Now.

But we must be precise about what the Now is, because it is not what most people imagine. The Now is not a very short duration. It is not a thin slice of time, a brief interval between past and future. A slice, however thin, has thickness. A duration, however brief, has length. The Now has neither.

The Now is not a boundary in the ordinary sense — not a wall between two territories defined by what it separates rather than what it is in itself. The Now is best understood as a singular point of actualization: a point where the normal rules of measurement break down. You cannot measure the Now because it is not a length. It is the condition that makes length possible. It is where reality crosses from potential into actual, and that crossing has no width. It happens at a point of zero thickness, continuously, without interruption.

This is why you cannot step outside the Now to observe it. You can remember the past only now. You can anticipate the future only now. Every act of consciousness, every breath, every decision, occurs now. The Now is not one moment among many. It is the only mode of existence that is ever actual.

V. THE INVERSION

Here is where the standard picture of time must be inverted.

Most accounts assume the present moves — that the Now is a spotlight traveling from past to future along a fixed timeline, illuminating each moment briefly before moving on. Under this picture the Now is the most fragile thing in existence: perpetually arriving, perpetually vanishing, replaced by the next Now, which will itself be replaced.

But if the Now is the condition of all events — if nothing becomes actual except at the Now — then the Now cannot itself be in motion. A condition does not travel. Gravity does not fall. The Now does not flow.

What we experience as the flow of time is not the movement of the Now. It is the succession of events continuously actualized within the Now. The Now does not move to

meet new events. Events are actualized at the Now and immediately become past. The Now remains.

> *The Now does not pass. What passes is what is actualized within the Now. We are not moving through time; we are stationary in the Now while reality is continuously actualized.*

What we call flow is real — but it is the flow of content, not of the present itself. The sensation that the present is moving is a cognitive reconstruction: the mind connecting the left loop of memory with the right loop of anticipation, generating the feeling of a moving now from what is in fact a stationary one.

The present does not move along time; rather, time is the ordering of what becomes present.

VI. THE LEMNISCATE

The shape that best maps this structure is the lemniscate — the figure-eight curve that mathematicians write as the symbol for infinity.

Consider its geometry. There are two loops. The left loop curves back on itself — this is memory, the reconstruction of what was. The right loop curves forward — this is anticipation, the projection of what might be. Both loops are in motion in the sense that they extend away from the center and return. Neither loop is real in the fullest sense: the past is no longer actual, the future is not yet actual.

But the center — the crossing point — is different. It does not move with the loops. It is structurally fixed. Without a fixed intersection, the relation between past and future would be undefined. The lemniscate requires the invariant crossing point; without it the loops could not relate — no common ground, no shared origin. The figure would not be a figure.

That crossing point is the Now. It is not participating in the motion of the loops. It is what makes the motion of the loops intelligible. It is the mandatory passage point — you cannot trace the figure without passing through it — and yet the point itself goes nowhere.

This is also where agency lives. At the crossing point, you are neither narrating the past nor constructing the future. You are deciding. The crossing point is the point of maximum ontological tension — the place where the two non-real domains of memory and projection meet the one real domain of the present. It is the only place where something genuinely new can be introduced into reality. It is the only place you are free.

It is also worth noting that the lemniscate does not describe time alone. Time itself is invariant — the Now does not move. But time, matter, and space together produce a lemniscatic movement of reality. None of the three generates motion alone. What moves is their composite — the continuous becoming of existence, crossing through the Now, always forward, always singular.

VII. ONE NOW

There is a temptation to think of the Now as personal — my Now, your Now, billions of private present moments happening simultaneously around the globe. Someone is sleeping now. Someone is being born now. Someone is writing, exercising, grieving, laughing, now. It can seem as though each of these is a separate present, a private present, belonging to the person experiencing it.

But that is a confusion between the Now and the events actualized within it. The events are plural — sleeping, writing, grieving are different actions with different contents. But they are not actualized in different Nows. They are actualized in the same Now, simultaneously, each as a distinct event within the one shared present.

The Now does not multiply. It does not belong to anyone. It is the singular, universal ground within which all events are actualized. Every being that exists, exists now — not in their own Now, but in the one Now that no one possesses because it is prior to possession itself.

This has a consequence for identity that modern speculation has missed. The multiverse hypothesis imagines alternate versions of the same person making different choices in branching parallel timelines. But identity is not defined by possibility. Identity is constituted by actualization in the Now. There are not multiple Nows in which different

versions of the same self act. There is one point of actualization, one shared Now, one unrepeatable self.

> *There are many possibilities of me. There is only one actuality of me. The soul is indivisible because the Now is indivisible. You cannot split what has no width.*

One time to be born. One time to die. Not one time to be born and to die in the same Now — sequence is real, order is real, the arc of a life is real and unrepeatable. The lemniscate does not loop back and repeat. It crosses at the Now and continues. You pass through the crossing point once per moment, always forward, always singular.

VIII. THE QUESTION THE NOW RAISES

We have established that the Now is singular, invariant, universal, and zero-thickness. It is the condition of all actualization. Nothing becomes real except at the Now.

But here is the question that the Now cannot answer about itself: what holds it open?

The Now has no thickness. It has no substance. It is the thinnest possible thing — thinner than any physical measurement can reach, thinner than the shortest interval any instrument can record. It is a point at which existence is continuously renewed, but it has no reserves of its own, no depth from which to draw. Dependence without ground is not neutrality — it is collapse.

And if the Now ceased — even for an instant — there would be no instant in which it ceased. Everything would cease with it. Not gradually, not sequentially. The condition of all actualization cannot be absent for a moment without ending the possibility of all moments. The Now is not just important. It is, structurally, everything.

So what sustains it? This is not a religious question masquerading as philosophy. It is a genuine structural question. Every dependent thing points to something it depends on. Time depends on matter and space. Matter depends on the Now. The Now depends on something it cannot provide for itself. Follow the chain of dependencies to its terminus,

and you find something that must be self-sustaining — not because faith demands it, but because the alternative is that nothing is sustained at all.

IX. I AM

In the book of Exodus, when Moses asks God for His name, the answer is not a proper noun. It is a grammatical statement: I AM WHO I AM. Not I was. Not I will be. I AM — pure, unqualified, self-sustaining present tense. No past dependence, no future contingency. Just absolute being in the mode of the Now.

That is not poetry. It is a precise ontological claim. And it maps exactly onto the structural question we just raised. The Now requires a ground that is not itself in time — because if the ground were in time, it would itself require a Now in which to exist, and we would face an infinite regress. The ground of the Now must be what the Now itself cannot be: self-sustaining, non-dependent, outside the sequence it makes possible.

God does not sustain time the way a hand holds a cup — as though time were a substance requiring physical support. God sustains the Now the way attention holds a thought: the moment the sustaining withdraws, the thought does not fall. It ceases. There is no falling, no delay, no transition. It simply is not.

This is also why I AM is not a statement made from within a passing moment. It is a statement that constitutes the moment. The Alpha and the Omega — not the first event in a sequence and the last event in the same sequence, but the one in whom the entire structure of before and after is simultaneously held. From inside the lemniscate, we experience the crossing point one Now at a time, moving through it continuously, never able to stop. God holds the whole figure at once — both loops, the crossing point, the beginning and the end — not because He is very large, but because He is not inside the figure at all.

The prologue of John's Gospel reaches for the same truth from a different angle: in the beginning was the Word, and through Him all things were made, and without Him nothing was made that has been made. If God sustains the Now, and nothing becomes actual except at the Now, then nothing is made except through Him — not as a distant

first cause who set things in motion and withdrew, but as the continuous sustaining presence without which the crossing point collapses and actuality ceases.

> *The Now is not God. But the Now is the closest created point of contact with God that every human being — believer or not — touches at every single moment of their existence. You cannot step outside it. You cannot avoid it. The Now is where God and creature meet.*

X. BACK TO THE QUESTION

Does time need me, or do I need time?

We said at the beginning that there might be a third answer. Here it is.

Neither is primary. Both are dependent — not on each other, but on the Now. And the Now is dependent on what I AM names: a non-temporal absolute that sustains the condition of all becoming without itself becoming.

I need time in the sense that I am a creature whose being unfolds through change, whose identity is constituted by the successive actualizations of my agency within the one shared present. Without time — without the condition of ordered change — I could not become. I would be static, which for a creature is the same as not being.

But time needs matter. Matter needs space. Space and matter and time together produce the lemniscatic movement of reality — the continuous crossing and recrossing of the one invariant Now. Remove me, and time loses one actualization. Remove all matter, and time loses its ground entirely. In that sense, time is more ontologically fragile than water. Water would persist in a universe without me. Ontological time would not.

And yet neither of us — neither the creature nor the time within which the creature acts — is what holds the Now open. That is the work of the one who does not say I was, or I will be, but simply, without qualification, without past or future, in the only grammar adequate to what is most real:

I AM.

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Note on sources and method

Oscar Gaitan develops this framework as part of a broader topology of time in which temporal experience is structured lemniscatically, with the present moment as the invariant crossing point between the loops of memory and anticipation. This essay addresses the ontological and theological dimensions of that structure. The philosophical references — Augustine, Aristotle, Heidegger, Bergson, Aquinas, Boethius, Einstein — are not sources for the argument but parallel witnesses to aspects of it. The argument stands or falls on its own structural coherence, not on their authority.